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MIDNIGHT TRAIN TO MEMPHIS

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# SLASH

CHRISTONE "KINGFISH" INGRAM,  
SAMANTHA FISH AND THE BLUES TOUR  
OF THE CENTURY!

PLUS GARY CLARK JR. + MARTY FRIEDMAN + BRUCE KULICK + TOWA BIRD + BILLY GIBBONS



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# BRUCE KULICK

Kulick — the steady-as-a-rock guitarist during Kiss's non-makeup era — discusses the making of *Crazy Nights*, *Hot in the Shade* and *Revenge* (and, um, not being asked to take part in the band's final shows)

By Andrew Daly

PAUL MATTINGLY/DETTY IMAGES

**K**RISTIE NON-MAKEUP era is often relegated to "persona non grata" status — at least for original-lineup diehards. But things were different for Kiss fans growing up without Ace Frehley — as they only knew Bruce Kulick.

Of course, before Kulick, there was Vinnie Vincent, who some fans say "saved Kiss." And then there was star-crossed shredder Mark St. John, who Kulick replaced.

But the truth is that despite Frehley's iconic foundational licks, Vin-

cent's cult following and St. John's... well, never mind about him... without Kulick holding down the fort as the lead guitarist of rock's most bombastic band between 1984 and 1996, Kiss wouldn't have had a house to bring down thereafter, let alone a non-makeup era to forsake.

"When I came into Kiss, I wasn't asked to imitate Ace," Kulick says. "I'm very thankful for that because it allowed me the freedom to be myself. If I was asked to do what Ace did, I'm not sure things would have worked."

And that's a good thing, as after Kulick joined in 1984, Kiss experienced success with records like *Asylum* (1985), *Crazy Nights* (1987) and *Hot in the Shade* (1989). But for purists, none of that "mattered."

"There are misconceptions about Eighties Kiss," Kulick says, "the biggest of which is that we sucked! Old fans maybe didn't get it. But the fans who grew up seeing Kiss without makeup knew how good we were. Certain years of my era were magical; I stand by the Eighties; we were a cut above. You're always in the winning circle when you have two leaders like Paul Stanley and Gene Simmons."

The Eighties might have been alright for Kiss, but a problematic era was ahead in the early Nineties, as drummer Eric Carr died of heart cancer in 1991. Additionally, music was changing: hair metal was out, grunge was in, leaving Kiss — a band of men in their forties — to stare their musical mortality in its face.

That led to producer Bob Ezrin being called in for Kiss's Nineties opener, *Revenge* (1992), which Kulick has long championed. "We put so much into *Revenge*," he says. "But it wasn't received well as, by that time, Nirvana had hit."

Kiss hit the road in support of *Revenge* in April 1992, but kickass songs and a killer vibe couldn't save a tour that was doomed from the start. "We toured, but the arenas were half empty," Kulick says. "Paul and Gene were frustrated. We didn't know the future; I could tell there was hesitation from the top down."

Some old-guard bands folded, while others rode grunge out — but not Kiss. They embraced their grun-

**"GENE AND PAUL KNEW I HAD MY ROOTS IN THE RIGHT PLACES, SUCH AS JIMI HENDRIX,**

gier side, which Gene Simmons loved, and Paul Stanley hated, leading to the 1995 sessions for *Carnival of Souls* (1997). But all wasn't well, and while on a break, Stanley and Simmons pulled the ripcord by inviting Kiss founders Ace Frehley and Peter Criss onstage for an infamous taping of MTV's *Unplugged*.

That might have seemed like an innocent gathering of old friends, but Kulick knew better. "Their lack of attention to *Carnival of Souls* made sense," he says. "Paul and Gene were preparing to put together the reunion, which took a lot of leg work." That leg work manifested as a Stanley/Simmons/Frehley/Criss reunion and the 1996-1997 Alive/Worldwide Tour, leading to Kulick and Singer, well, being gone. At first, the reunion worked, bringing riches to the Kiss kingdom... until the wheels came off, leading to Frehley quitting in 2002 and Criss being fired in 2004, while Black N' Blue guitarist turned Kiss tour manager Tommy Thayer and once-jilted, now re-welcomed, drummer Eric Singer became the Spaceman and the Catman.

Kiss cashed in for another 20 years with Thayer and Singer. It is what it is, and really — who can blame them? You've gotta, as Paul Stanley said on *Animalize*, "get all you can take." But there's some sadness associated with Kulick, who, despite his importance to Kiss, wasn't mentioned during Kiss's final December 2023 shows in New York City, at Madison Square Garden — let alone invited.

Then again, all of Kiss's former members were egregiously ignored, so once again — it is what it is. But Kulick, one of the under-appreciated guitarists of any era, doesn't care. "I've made peace with not being included in Kiss's *End of the Road*," he says. "That said, no, they never called me."

"I've always missed being in Kiss, but if being in Kiss meant being the Spaceman like Tommy, I wouldn't want to do it. And if being a part of the final shows meant I had to ask to be there, I'd rather stay home. I guess that's why Ace respects me and has always been kind to me."

As for how he views himself within the canon of Kis-

story, Kulick smiles, saying, "I was never asked to clone Ace Frehley; I'm very proud of that. I made those songs my own. I am proud of my era; it was real and not just about money. It came to a screeching halt; the power of the reunion era killed it. It died. It was over. I had to move on."

As for where Kulick goes from here, or if he laments not being asked onstage for Kiss's final shows, he says, "I was not expecting it to happen; I know to read between the lines when I heard the press and interviews with Doc McGhee. Did they miss an opportunity to share the importance of the past? In my opinion, yes, Kisstory was ignored. The present and future was what the final show at MSG was about. I kept hearing that it was a disappointment from the fans, my only hurt was knowing NYC was ground zero with the most passionate Kiss fans, and I love experiencing their excitement in person. So, me not being invited to celebrate with them was unfortunate for me personally."

"Nothing has been planned with Gene or Eric. What could happen? I am as curious as the fans! I know I will be doing many creative projects, such as new music, perhaps an autobiography, special events and performances that will focus on my legacy. It's a very exciting time for me."

**Your brother, Bob Kulick, had a long-time association with Kiss. Is that how you met Paul and Gene?**

I met Paul Stanley by tagging along with my brother. I had a car, and Bob didn't, so we would hook up with Paul in New York City to see a movie or go to one of the cool clubs. Paul was very mellow compared to his onstage persona.

**Were you a Kiss fan before joining?**

I wasn't a crazed Kiss fan, so I wasn't nervous, even though I was excited to hang out with Paul and my brother.

Bruce Kulick performs with Kiss in Milwaukee, December 30, 1984. "When I came into Kiss, I wasn't asked to imitate Ace," Kulick says. "I'm very thankful for that."

with Mark St. John being unable to do solos cropped up, and they called me, it was fun to be a ghost guitarist like my brother had for Kiss before."

**After Mark St. John developed reactive arthritis, Kiss called you for the *Animalize* tour. Did you join right away?**

No, not right away. But when it was time to make the decision, Paul called me in my hotel room, saying, "Bruce, the Kiss lead guitarist gig is yours." He then explained a few things about what he wanted me to focus on, like, "Being competitive with the new styles of guitarists."

**Coming in behind Vinnie Vincent and Mark St. John, who weren't right for Kiss, what was the directive?**

Gene and Paul knew I had my roots in the right places, such as Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton and Leslie West. But Van Halen was huge, and Eddie was such a virtuoso, so that was a style I needed to make my own. I added that into my lead playing, and in retrospect, I mixed all those influences, which made me an excellent fit for Kiss.

**Was it challenging to execute the parts of Ace Frehley, considering his feel and vibrato seem impossible to replicate?**

I wasn't asked to play that like Ace. We know Tommy Thayer's role as the "Spaceman" was exactly that, and he did it well. But my approach was to make Ace's guitar riffs my own without losing the signature parts he created. It was a relatively easy thing to evolve into. I knew Ace's style was unique and essential to performing the band's early catalog.

**The sessions for 1985's *Asylum* represented your first proper Kiss album. What was that like?**

I went in with Marshall amps paired with Charvel and Jackson guitars. I was excited to be at Electric Lady Studios in Greenwich Village [NYC] because Jimi Hendrix had that place built. I worked with Gene and Paul for over a month straight every day. I loved it all, as now I was the official lead guitarist of the band. I'll always love "Tears Are Falling," as I got flashy with a cool riff that's

JIMMY PAGE, ERIC CLAPTON AND LESLIE WEST. BUT VAN HALEN WAS HUGE..."

hard to play and ended with an exciting fast phrase. I love that it's a signature solo of my era.

**I listened to *Crazy Nights* the other day; despite the keyboards, it's very guitar-forward.**

I used my ESP M-1 "Banana" guitar quite a bit for *Crazy Nights*. By '87, I often used that guitar and a few other Super Strats. I know [producer] Ron Nevison heard and loved the clarity and power of that guitar. And you're right about the guitar sound on that record; we worked hard on the solos, and they are featured upfront in the mixes.

**The *Crazy Nights* tour flopped, though. How did that impact Kiss going into *Hot in the Shade*?**

It was time to break away from a name-brand producer. So, in 1989, Gene and Paul came up with songs with some help from Eric Carr, me and several outside writers, and off we went to a small studio in Hollywood almost under the 101 freeway, and Gene and Paul produced the record.

**Forgoing a producer didn't change the result, though.**

Well, *Hot in the Shade* received mixed results and reviews, but it's a great LP — and "Forever" is another signature solo for me. I used fewer Floyd Rose whammy bar guitars and more Gibson Les Paul-style guitars. We returned to a bluesy approach for the songs and the playing, which shows.

**How would you describe the state of Kiss as the band entered the Nineties?**

That's a good question. The *Hot in the Shade* tour was fun; we had a great stage show, did many classic songs and featured many amazing supporting bands. This was pre-grunge; if grunge had come earlier, *Hot in the Shade* wouldn't have survived. We had had a few hits on *Hot in the Shade*, namely "Hide Your Heart" and "Forever," but we knew to keep moving forward and get more traction, we needed to harden things up.

**What was the game plan?**

Bringing in Bob Ezrin was a big part

of it. I don't know how the discussion about bringing Bob in started, but it was a great move. But you've gotta remember what happened with Bob during the disaster that was *Music from "The Elder"*; even though Bob had done *Destroyer*, Gene and Paul were over-cautious. But even during *Destroyer*, Bob was supposedly erratic and doing a lot of cocaine, so Gene and Paul were unsure.

**Did Eric Carr's death in 1991 impact the Kiss machine much?**

Even before he got sick, Eric let things bother him. He was unhappy about his role in Kiss. It was complicated. I felt for Eric but disagreed with his reasoning. Losing him was tough because he was a great drummer, but Eric Singer stepped up. What happened to Eric Carr wasn't expected, and we didn't know he was so sick at the end of the previous tour. So we got Eric Singer [who had played in Paul Stanley's solo club tour band in '89]; we were sad about Eric Carr's cancer diagnosis but had to move forward. We were committed to making *Revenge*. I'm glad we had Eric Carr's vocals for "God Gave Rock 'N' Roll to You II" and [had] him in the video.

**Some say "God Gave Rock 'N' Roll to You II" is an anthem akin to "Rock and Roll All Night."**

I agree. We had Bob Ezrin produce it after we covered Argent's old song as a test to see if we could work with him. But we completely reworked it; Argent's version was inappropriate for Kiss. Our version was a part of the *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* soundtrack, and then we committed to working with Bob for *Revenge*.

**What was it like working with Bob Ezrin, who, according to Ace Frehley, can be rough on guitarists?**

I remember there were no compromises; we had a vision. But there were some crazy times, like when I was working on the solo for "Domino." I initially had a direction, put some EBow on it, doubled and tripled what I had done, then left it alone and went to lunch.

Kiss's Bruce Kulick (left) and Paul Stanley in action at London's Wembley Arena in May 1992. "We toured, but the arenas were half empty," Kulick says. "Paul and Gene were frustrated."

When I came back, Bob said, "I hate it. Do it again."

**How did you hash it out?**

I didn't love that, but Bob was right; the approach was wrong. He had me use an off-the-cuff approach, and it worked. Bob always said, "Play from your balls, Bruce," which meant, "Play melodically, but make it tough, and make it count." It wasn't always about pedals; he meant to play tough physically.

**Would you also credit Bob for bringing Gene back to the forefront?**

Let's be real here: Kiss is Paul and Gene's band. They make concessions only to each other. That's how they work. The relationship between Paul and Gene is like a marriage. But bringing in Bob Ezrin made both Paul and Gene happy, which helped.

**How so?**

They both respected Ezrin, whereas, when we recorded *Crazy Nights*, Gene hated Ron Nevison, while Paul loved him. Gene was crying during *Crazy Nights*, and Paul was happy, which showed in Gene's songs. But with *Revenge*, you had a case where we had Bob Ezrin, aka the mad professor, who had both Paul's and Gene's respect.

**As he had with Ace Frehley on *Destroyer's* "Sweet Pain," Ezrin replaced you with Dick Wagner on "Every Time I Look at You." Why?**

They were hurrying to finish "Every Time I Look at You," but it was a holiday weekend, and I wasn't around. It just so happened that Dick Wagner was recording in the studio next door, so they grabbed him and he played the solo. I didn't tell that story a lot in the past because I was a little hurt about not being on the track. They let me take a stab at the solo, but I had to

admit, what Dick did was perfect, so we left it. If you listen back to *Unplugged*, though, you can hear that I match what Dick did, but that solo sounds like me. Dick used my ESP Explorer and harnessed what I was doing, making it seamless. That's the only lead I didn't play on a record while in Kiss. It worked, so I got over it.

**"[PRODUCER] BOB [EZRIN] ALWAYS SAID, 'PLAY FROM YOUR BALLS, BRUCE,' WHICH**



### Well, you killed it on every other track.

*Revenge* was a great showcase for me. The tones and the solos were on point, and the guitar choices were interesting and not remotely simple. Kiss often gets labeled as "simple," but if you listen, Kiss's songs are anything but.

**Can you pick out an example of that?**  
Take "Unholy," for example; there are a lot of complex parts, both rhythmically, and — of course — the whole lead section has a timing where it's not all 4/4. That song was one I was always proud of because of its complexity, but it was weird enough that I called it my "Frankenstein timing" because there's so much going on underneath.

### Was the prevalence of grunge the reason Kiss overhauled their image for *Revenge*'s promotion?

It would be easy to boil it down to that, but *Revenge* was a heavy record, so it made sense to toughen up our image. But I don't know why we felt *Revenge* should be a leather-clad-looking thing with a battleship, tank-like, riveted metal object behind us on the cover. It felt right, I guess.

KISS NOT FOR THE DIFFERENT

### What led to Kiss going full-on grunge with *Carnival of Souls*?

You had these young guys who looked like they could be druggies that didn't seem to care about how they looked. Guys playing very dark, intense music, you know, the type of stuff that doesn't make you smile or want to make out with your girlfriend in the backseat of your car. We decided there had to be a reaction to that.

### Gene loved it, but Paul hated it, right?

Gene was into a lot of that stuff. I remember him liking Smashing Pumpkins and even "Creep" by Radiohead. But Paul was not attracted to it, and I don't think he wanted any part of it.

### Gene embraced the darkness of grunge. I think the "Demon" persona came out. Did you enjoy grunge?

I have respect for guys like Kurt Cobain; he started Nirvana, who, by the way, was a kickass band. Kurt was not much of a lead guitarist, but he could write these songs and sing with this emotion that connected an entire generation. I've always felt that music goes in 10- or 12-year cycles, and then

it shifts again.

**Kiss took a break from recording *Carnival of Souls* for *Unplugged*, and Peter and Ace showed up to shock the world. You had to know something was up, right?**

Eric and I knew something was going on. We didn't know what would happen, but we knew Paul and Gene's attention was elsewhere, maybe even on Peter and Ace, but not for sure. So Eric Singer and I would get together, head into the studio, experiment and demo things for *Carnival of Souls*.

### Grunge experimentation, yes?

The sound of Stone Temple Pilots and Alice In Chains was present. Jerry Cantrell and Dave Navarro were cool, so we embraced those sounds. It's not that we were trying to jump into the trend, per se; it was more those things bled into the music. We were writing, playing meaner and more brutally and taking risks.

### "I Walk Alone" is your lone Kiss lead vocal and the final track from *Carnival of Souls*. That's ironic.

By the time we got into the studio again, Gene and Paul were not committed because they were conversing with Ace and Peter about the reunion, unbeknownst to Eric and me. So we got in the studio, and I've got this primitive version of "I Walk Alone," and Gene was supposed to sing it. But because he wasn't around, I sang it.

### Gene and Paul were talking to Ace and Peter, but you still didn't see it coming?

I knew something was up. A reunion was always in the back of my mind; I hoped it would never happen; I always knew it would — especially after *Unplugged*. So, like you said, "I Walk Alone" was prophetic because it was the beginning of me walking alone. I poured my soul into Kiss, and it was upsetting to know that while Eric and I were recording *Carnival of Souls*, Paul and Gene were being fitted for their reunion costumes.

### How did Paul and Gene break the news?

Paul and Gene were comfortable with

**MEANT, 'PLAY MELODICALLY, BUT MAKE IT TOUGH, AND MAKE IT COUNT'**



a version of Kiss with Eric and me in it. They couldn't kill it unless they felt the reunion would last. When they told us, they said, "We're not letting you go. We aren't sure if this is going to work. We aren't going to put *Carnival of Souls* out right away. We'll finish it for the label, but we'll tour with Ace and Peter."

#### And how did you take it?

I knew that the day would come, but Eric Singer was devastated. Paul and Gene did the right thing by keeping us on salary for a year, but they had to do that because they could go back if the reunion blew up. But once success came, and Ace and Peter did their jobs, the writing was on the wall.

#### And that's fine, but the lineup with you and Eric Singer seemed like a case of what could have been.

I've always looked at it as I was never fired from Kiss; I was left behind for a wildly successful commercial ven-

ture. You don't have to be an accountant to understand Paul and Gene. What Kiss would make with Eric and me was like five million, but with Ace and Peter, we're talking about netting \$0 million; that's truly obscene.

#### At the expense of chemistry and musical integrity...

True. All the cracks reopened. If you look at *Psycho Circus*, that was not a band album. It's got Tommy Thayer on guitar, Kevin Valentine on drums, I'm playing some bass — and Ace and Peter are barely there. Sure, the four of them toured in support of it and did that "final tour," but the truth is that putting the makeup back on at the time was a purely commercial decision.

#### Do you feel the reunion killed Kiss as a creative entity?

That's tough to say because you've got people who like the music they did after the reunion. But did they turn their back on what was a very creative and solid band? Yes, they did. But

RON WILSON/REDWOOD MUSIC/GETTY IMAGES

Kiss in Tokyo, April 1988. [From left] Gene Simmons, Bruce Kulick, Paul Stanley and Eric Singer. "I don't buy Paul putting down some of that stuff," Kulick says. "He was there. He sang his heart out. He worked hard on it."

it was for the popularity and massive success of a reunion tour, which I can understand. But did they turn their back on that? Absolutely. Our version of Kiss had a lot of promise. We clicked, got along, and shone brightly. It's a shame it was killed. I understand why it happened, but it took me time.

#### Are you disappointed Paul and Gene didn't call you when the reunion fell apart?

I'm not disappointed they didn't ask me to be in Kiss again. To be in Kiss again, I would have had to be the Spaceman, right? If I had done that, I would have negated my entire non-makeup era. Tommy Thayer did a fine job playing Ace's riffs with some swagger. He did the Spaceman well, but I never wanted to.

#### When you look back on your era of Kiss, what stands out?

We persevered. The Eighties had Paul steering the ship while Gene was distracted. But it wasn't as one-sided as it's made out to be, as they have always completed each other. I learned so much from them about the "Kiss way." And then, in the Nineties, musically speaking, we were as good as any Kiss era.

#### As good as the vaunted Seventies era?

Absolutely. I've heard Gene pick on *Alive III*, for example, but it's a load of shit. It's like, "Dude, give me a break. We were killing it then." Here's the truth about the Eighties and Nineties: We could play the old shit right, and we played the new shit right. I'm not saying we had the magic of the original band, but don't put that era down because you're trying to sell the makeup. I've always said that was bullshit.

I also don't buy Paul putting down some of that stuff. He was there. He sang his heart out. He worked hard on it. Is Paul entitled to his opinion? Of course. But to reduce an era to nothing? I don't buy it. We persevered and would have made it out to the other side given a chance.

It wasn't grunge that killed that era; it was a reunion tour.

**"PUTTING THE MAKEUP BACK ON AT THE TIME WAS A PURELY COMMERCIAL DECISION"**